

Tinicum, PA – On Wednesday, February 20, Congressman Joe Sestak held a press conference with Don Chapman, President of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association at the Philadelphia International Airport, regarding unsafe procedures used by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) during departures at the airport. — “We are here today to ensure that the FAA is accountable to the public, not only for the noise that results from flying low over dense residential communities, but for the safety of the citizens of Delaware and Chester Counties. For too long, the FAA has ignored the public’s safety in its Airspace Redesign proposal and implementation,” said Congressman Sestak. “The FAA has for too long been arrogant in its approach to the implications of its flawed process in developing its Airspace Redesign proposal.”

This arrogance—and non-caring of the impact of the FAA proposal to the public—was seen in the comment by Department of Transportation Spokesperson Brian Turmail, who in response to the hold that Senators Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez placed on the Senate nomination of FAA Acting Administrator Robert Sturgell, maintained that “we hope they won’t let a small thing like a slight change in noise levels for a small number of residents affect a confirmation that everyone would agree needs to be made swiftly to ensure the safety and continued efficiency of our aviation system.”

“Of greater concern, however, than the arrogant attitude of the FAA is its failure to properly address safety issues, not only throughout the U.S. airspace, but now in partially implementing the airspace redesign in Philadelphia.” said Congressman Sestak.

Congressman Sestak pointed to new headings that have been implemented by the FAA at the Philadelphia International Airport, where pilots are routinely directed to ignore standard departure instructions, and are risking the safety and well-being of the passengers.

“With the implementation of the new 245’ and 268’ headings in Philadelphia, air traffic controllers are forced to manually override the standard departure procedures for all flights using the new headings,” said Congressman Sestak. “This is not only burdensome for air traffic controllers, but confusing to commercial airline pilots, and potentially unsafe for travelers.”

To underscore this, Congressman Sestak then read a statement from U.S. Airways Airline Pilots Association Safety Chairman Dan Sicchio to highlight the concerns over the new departure headings at the Philadelphia International Airport.

In his statement Captain Sicchio wrote: “Recently we have seen an issue with departures from Philadelphia. The published SID has an assigned heading of 255 which has been in place and in practice for many years. Prior to departing the gate, this heading is a required briefing item. It is now a practice where a different heading is being assigned as part of the takeoff clearance. This practice can easily result in confusion, as it is a change to the briefed departure heading. It also occurs during a very busy time in the cockpit, and possibly while only one pilot is on the radio. For these reasons, we would like to see a standard heading both published and flown as a routine. If this is not possible, the SID should be amended to advise that a radar vector will be assigned. This would make the crew aware that they will be receiving a heading as part of a takeoff clearance.”

Congressman Sestak further added that the FAA is implementing changes in an unsafe manner—on runways just as a pilot is about to take off or taxiing---at a time where unsafe runway conditions have actually increased in the past year. A recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, released in November 2007, on runway safety, found that the number of runway incursions and near collisions reached a high of 370 in 2007, a 12 percent increase from 2006. The GAO blames the poor progress on the FAA's lack of coordination and leadership, technology challenges, the lack of pertinent data, and human-factor issues.

“The FAA is implementing this additional unsafe, ad hoc procedure as a pilot is taxiing or about to depart at a time when our runway safety is less safe than the previous year,” said Congressman Sestak. “In addition, this is also at a time when we have learned that our airspace is more unsafe than the FAA has permitted for us to know about.”

Congressman Sestak pointed to the decrease in air safety conditions which was indicated by data finally released by the National Aeronautics and Safety Administration (NASA)’s National Aviation Operational Monitoring Service (NAOMS) survey data which showed that “Pilots reported at least twice as many bird strikes, near mid-air collisions and runway incursions as other government monitoring systems show, according to a person familiar with the results...”

“The FAA is not only arrogant, but more importantly has failed to confront its bottom line responsibility to ensure the safety of air passengers. Lawmakers and communities must continue to work to halt the flawed—and unsafe—FAA Airspace Redesign plan,” said Congressman Sestak. “There are better options that can be pursued in a deliberate manner.”

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for

31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.